

Thank you for taking my testimony. The problems in this court system reach far beyond the costs of GALs. After 26 years of marriage, only three months of mediation and \$1200, my former husband and I amicably divorced. At 5, our eldest son was diagnosed with a life-threatening medical condition, so lack of affordable self-employed medical insurance meant bankruptcy and years of paying excessive interest rates on our home and cars. With medical insurance at \$1200 per month and our other bills so inflated, we struggled to make ends meet. I took an enormous risk divorcing with no assets of value, working very part time and homeschooling our children. Clearly, I believed my children were better served by the end of our marital discord, as the financial burden of life post-divorce was enormous. Yet, in spite of the challenge of splitting an income not previously sufficient for one household, we managed to maintain civility for two years.

In 2009, my former husband decided he had supported his family long enough, hired an attorney and informed me she "would get him out of these obligations". She and the courts tore my family apart. In 2010, I lost my house, most of my belongings, still had an unpaid \$90,000 second mortgage, an IRS debt and was thrust into the nightmare of Connecticut's "Family" Courts. My former husband sued to "relieve himself of his obligation" to pay alimony, child support, college education and medical insurance. I liquidated my retirement account for a retainer, as my lawyer assured me it was a violation of CT statute to rewrite your divorce. 7 trial days and \$50,000 in debt later, he had done just that. My income was cut in half, retroactively, leaving me owing him \$35,000, I lost my children as a tax deduction, new medical insurance saved him \$1000s but no longer covered my son's medical care. This part might shock you: our GAL was fair and my children liked him. After his interviews, he testified that my former husband was using the children as financial pawns. My eldest son gave the same testimony. The GAL was kicked out of the courtroom, his testimony disregarded and my son scolded and humiliated. The judge made it clear that her personal bias against my staying home, my low income and homeschooling were key in her punitive action against my family. Only my children's college educations were preserved. Still unhappy, my former husband hired a more aggressive attorney. My support was further reduced by 2/3 and my daughter forced to drop out of college. I filed bankruptcy and the judge openly punished me, claiming it was unfair to him. I homeschool my son while working 12-15 hour days from home.

Until lawyers got involved, my children had a future and the mandate for provision of basic needs and medical care. In what kind of court does a father time and again present with an expensive lawyer while the mother cannot afford one, only for the mother and children to be punished for being pro se. I want to ask those judges if they understand that when they "relieve a father of his obligations" those obligations do not evaporate—they become the obligations of the mother. What kind of court even entertains the concept of relief of parental obligation? In my last hearing I was told by the judge that I could have hired an attorney--that I "chose" to come to court without one. She never considered that I could not afford one and that no one in their right mind would enter that system unrepresented. It clearly never occurred to her to wonder why a man would pay an attorney to "relieve himself of his obligations" rather than meet those obligations.

I have no retirement, no savings, a 24 year old car, unpaid bills, no medical insurance, a sick child, a child forced to quit college and no hope. He has 3x my income for himself. Every time I walked out of that courtroom it took a little bit of my soul. The GALs are a very small symptom of a much larger cesspool of injustice. This is a system so corrupt nothing fair can prevail. A fair GAL is silenced and a mediated divorce is undone. The system invites conflict, promotes hardship, empties and then punishes, humiliates and degrades. Once you lose, the system is rigged to never set things right. The imbalance is shocking yet it permeates the rulings. . You need to dismantle this system, not tweak it. Remove power. Replace it with humanity. Jennifer Tow **Bill #494 3/31/14**